

Chapter II. Synopsis of Road History

The first highways in the area now known as King County were neither surveyed, nor graded, nor overland. They were the lakes, rivers and streams that laced the landscape and provided the area's first people with nourishment and a ready means of transportation across the region's varied topography. Therefore the county's earliest overland trails closely followed or connected these major bodies of water. These trails would eventually become the foundation for the modern network of roads in use today.

Public road building in King County began shortly after its establishment in 1852. The earliest road law governing roads and the building of bridges was enacted in 1854 at the first meeting of the Washington Territorial Legislature. Over the next half-century, however, very little was expended on road development and maintenance due to the dominance of the railroads and the county's continued dependency on water transportation. The monopoly of rail and water on transportation would finally break during the second decade of the 20th century, with the mass production of the automobile and push for road reform by national organizations like the Good Roads Association. Throughout the rest of the 20th century, transportation priorities would focus on road improvement and expansion.

Footpaths and early pack trails (1790-1851)

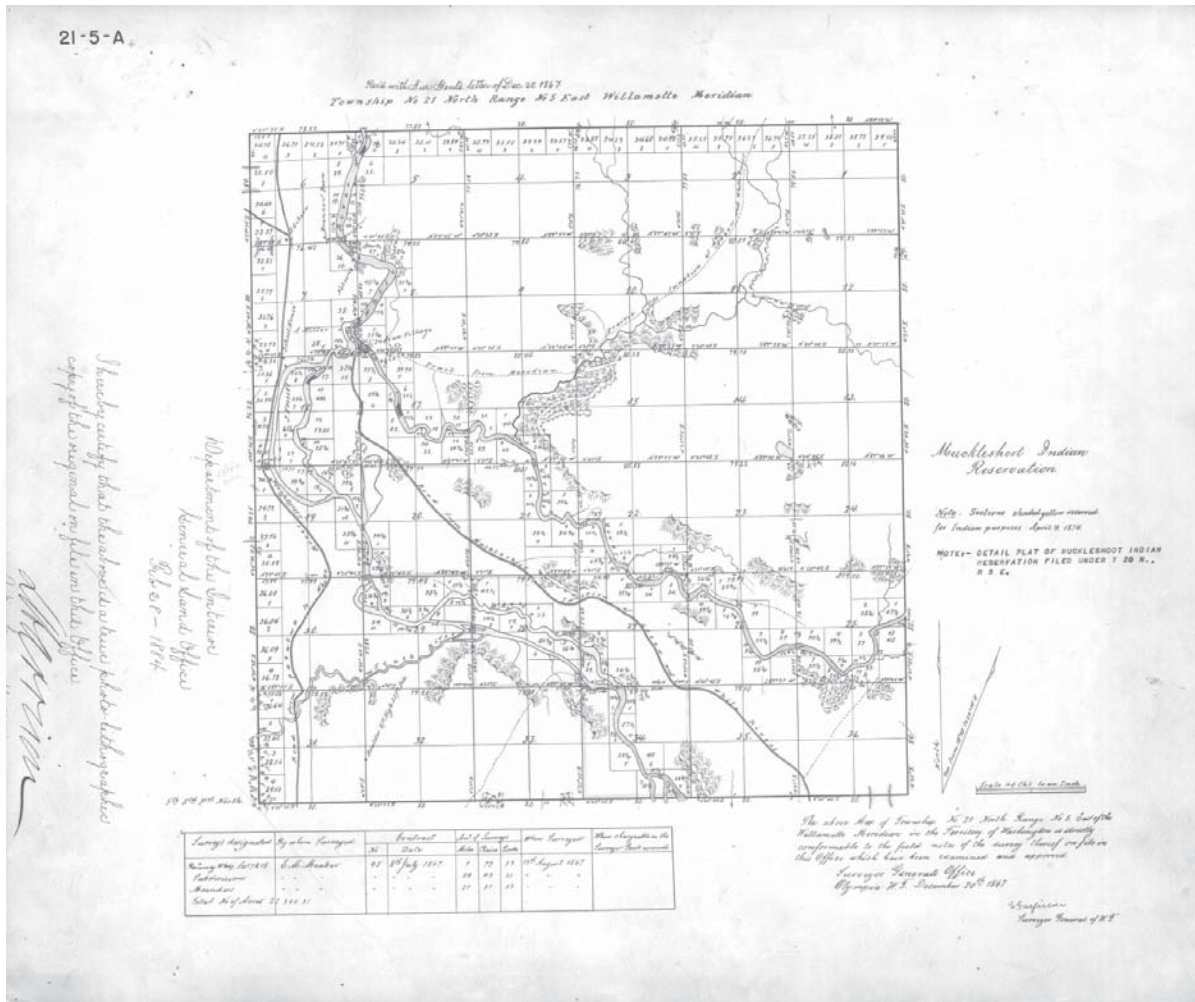
For centuries the Native Americans that inhabited the area that encompasses King

County—the Duwamish, Muckleshoot, Puyallup, Skykomish, Snoqualmie, Suquamish, and Tulalip peoples—developed thriving cultures with broad economic ties. Their relationships with the land, and the social connections they cultivated with neighboring coastal and eastern interior tribes, necessitated a sophisticated transportation system. Puget Sound, fresh water lakes and rivers offered a ready means of transport; and the canoe, designed for light travel, made it possible to penetrate far inland. Travel between settlements, as well as to and from resource areas, did necessitate some overland travel. In these instances, trails provided the shorter—if more challenging—route.

The most traveled footpaths through the mountains crossed over the passes of lowest elevation. Trails leading into King County from the east over Naches, Snoqualmie and Yakima Passes all followed the Yakima River to its headwaters in the Cascades, and then down the western slope along the Snoqualmie and White Rivers to Puget Sound. The trail over Stevens Pass traced the Wenatchee River to its headwaters, and then dropped into the watershed of the Skykomish River and eventually out to the Sound.

When the first Euro-American explorers came into the King County area in the 1830s, they took advantage of this existing network of native trails. One of the earliest pathways by land into the area was the Cowlitz River Trail, which brought travelers not over the





Government Land Office map showing the Muckleshoot Reservation, 1867. Courtesy of Bureau of Land Management, online Land Status & Cadastral Records Viewer



Cascades, but north from the Columbia River through forested western lowlands to southern Puget Sound. Until the 1850s, this was the only overland path available to emigrants who wanted to settle in the Puget Sound country, since it was the only one that could accommodate wagons, livestock and supplies.

Several shorter trails that connected existing native settlements to local resource areas were also adopted by settlers. General Land Office (GLO) maps from the mid-19th century, show trails leading from Lake Washington to Lake Sammamish, from Lake Sammamish to Fall City, and from Snoqualmie Falls along the Snoqualmie River, north. Portage trails also connected Lake Union to Lake Washington, and Vashon to Maury Islands. These GLO maps also show trails connecting the native settlements of Auburn village (Ilwaco) to Black River village (S'babadil), the Black River village to Lake Youngs, and resources like the Meridian Prairie to junction of Green and White rivers, and the Green River to Renton.¹

Wagons west, military roads and the first urban roads (1852-1873)

When Washington Territory was formally established in 1853, increasing numbers of pioneers began arriving in King County, forming

¹ U.S. General Land Office maps for Washington Territory can be accessed from the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management online database at www.blm.gov/or/landrecords/survey/ySrvy1.php.

settlements around the Black River (Renton), White River (Kent-Auburn), and Porter's Prairie (Enumclaw Plateau).² Thick forests with heavy undergrowth blanketed much of King County at this time, so readily cultivatable land was limited to the prairies and clearings maintained by Native peoples through seasonal burnings. Early settlers therefore gravitated to these open prairies, situated alongside or close to the main rivers that bisected the county—the Duwamish River, White River, Black River and Cedar River. The relative ease of water travel made it the favored mode of transport for both people and commodities well into the second half of the nineteenth century.

Despite the population growth the county experienced from 1851 to the mid-1870s, overland transportation remained primitive. Rough traces through the forest primarily serviced wagons and cattle, as well as early coal and lumber activities. Cleared dirt paths wound around the path of least resistance, going over hills and down dales, around large rocks and dense stands of trees, with the primary objective of connecting man, beast, and goods to bodies of water. These early roads were crude, jarring and seasonally impassible due to heavy snow, rain or mud. To mitigate the situation, corduroy (whole logs

of varying sizes placed perpendicular to the direction of travel), or puncheon (split or hewn logs laid with the flat surface up) were used to create a more permanent, hard surface. Plank roads (with stringers laid parallel to the direction of travel, and then planks placed perpendicular atop those) were also used.

During this period the majority of roads continued to be constructed and funded by private individuals, although military roads and those developed by private industries were important exceptions. During the Indian Wars of the 1850s, federal funds were allocated to improve some existing trails for military use. The Cowlitz River Trail and the Naches Pass Trail were two such roads in King County, although they were never actually completed as military projects. Some of the county's mine-to-market roads were also developed as early as the 1860s. Originally constructed as tram or service roads, they created an industrial network that would later become part of the foundation of the county's road system. By 1862 a road had been built from the Squak coal mines to Lake Sammamish, where the coal was then transferred to barges and floated to Seattle for distribution.³ Another road was used to transport coal overland from Lake Washington to Seattle

2 Charles Payton, "Overview of King County History" Historical Paper No. 1 (Seattle: Heritage 4Culture Publications Program, 2005), p. 7.

3 Clarence B. Bagley, History of King County, Washington. (Seattle: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1929), p. 284.





Bicycle beside wagon road, 1896. University of Washington, Special Collections, WAT082

wharves.⁴ Early skid roads (trails along which newly cut logs were transported) developed by local lumber operations were also important antecedents of the county's road network.

⁴ Frederick James Grant, *History of Seattle, Washington: with illustrations and biographical sketches of some of its prominent men and pioneers* (New York: American, 1891), p. 429.

From mud holes to good roads (1874-1899)

In the last three decades of the 19th century, King County began to experience significant growth. By the late 1870s expanding markets for timber products, coal, salmon and produce opened the area to national and international trade. From 1880-1890, the county's population grew from 6,970 (up from just over 2,000 in the 1870s) to 63,989. Of that total, over two thirds were counted in Seattle, making it the state's largest city.⁵ The discovery of gold in the Yukon and the resurgence of agricultural industries in 1897, brought King County back from a short but deep recession, launching it forward as an economic leader into the 20th century.

The expansion of railroads throughout the region in the 1880s was responsible for much of that progress. When the Northern Pacific Railroad crossed the Cascades via Stampede Pass in 1887, with its terminus at Tacoma, it provided the first direct rail access from the east to the southern Puget Sound area. In 1893, the Great Northern Railroad opened its line over Stevens Pass into Seattle, greatly improving rail access to the county. Local lines like the Seattle, Lake Shore and Eastern Railway serviced both local industry and population, transporting people and products from mines, mills and farms to commercial/urban centers like Ballard (connected 1886),

⁵ Alexander Norbert MacDonald, *Seattle's economic development 1880-1910* (Seattle: MacDonald, 1959), p. 145.

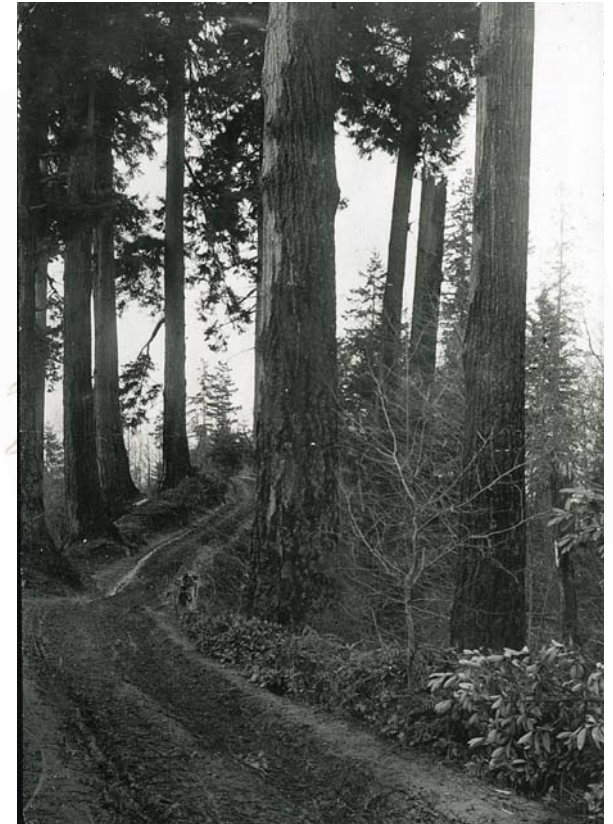
Brooklyn (in what is now west University District), Yesler (now part of Laurelhurst), Bothell (1887) and towns out to Gilman (now Issaquah).⁶ It was during this period when rail and water transportation networks became highly developed and together dominated local commerce.

Until the 1890s, roads were universally considered a local responsibility. Supervision fell to an elected county official but they were still built and maintained by local residents. To have a road declared a public thoroughfare, local residents would have to submit a petition to the county, then the road would go through a process of viewing, establishing and surveying. However, during the last decade of the 19th century, county officials were given more responsibility for the initiation, and actual construction and maintenance of public roads. This created a top-down approach to road development for the first time. The United States government also began taking a much more active role in road development at this time. In 1893 the federal government created the Office of Road Inquiry, whose duty it was to advise state and local officials on the best methods of improving their roads. All levels of government were beginning to feel pressure from “good roads” advocates nationwide, which first took the form of bicycle organizations, and then of early motorcar enthusiasts like the

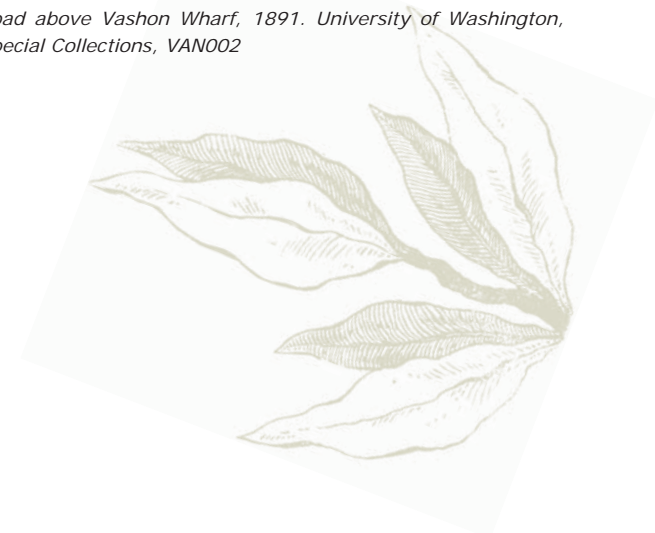
Washington State Association of Good Roads, founded in 1899.

As in the preceding period, roads established and constructed during this era were still designed with an easy route in mind. They frequently had dips and rises, curves, and no shaped shoulders. There was no provision to eliminate trees, boulders, and other things that today would be considered roadside hazards, so these items would be found immediately adjacent to the traveling surface. Roads looked “hemmed in”. Wherever practical, alignments followed section lines or property boundaries. Road surfacing continued to include dirt, puncheon, corduroy, and plank. In the later years of the 19th century, gravel began to be employed in certain areas where wetness created year-round problems. King County first experimented with a macadamized surface (mixing wet clay and gravel, and placing it over a prepared bed of rock) in 1894.⁷

During the 1860s and ‘70s planning primarily focused on establishing roads along main lines of travel between resource areas and/or larger settlements. By the late 1890s, however, several shorter roads (around 0.5-.75 mile long) began to appear on maps in areas like the Duwamish Valley, Enumclaw Plateau and Snoqualmie Valley. These areas had been



Road above Vashon Wharf, 1891. University of Washington, Special Collections, VAN002



6 Paul Dorpat, Seattle: Now & Then Vol. 3 (Seattle: Tartu Publications, 1994), p. 28.

7 King County (Wash.), Harold Laufer & Harry Hall Sisler, State Golden Jubilee: Fifth Annual Report of the County Road Engineer, 1939 (Seattle, 1939), p. 83.



Sunset Highway at Snoqualmie Pass, c. 1913. University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, WAS1009

settled early, and had grown into thriving agricultural centers by this time. These smaller roads were mainly connector roads from private farms to the main lines of travel, which had been extended the previous decade. By the end of the 19th century, around 600 roads had been established and built in King County.⁸ Around the same time, county roadwork began to focus on improvements to

existing roads, rather than new construction.

The automobile (1900-1929)

The first two decades of the 20th century saw another boom in many of King County's industries and urban centers. Companies like Boeing and the naval shipyards attracted numerous workers to the area, especially around World War I. The development of the electric trolleys, the interurban railway, and improved ferry service allowed residents to live further from work centers, spurring residential growth in communities like Shoreline, Bellevue, and Burien.

Although the automobile made its first appearance in Seattle on July 23rd, 1900, it was not until the 1910s when they began to be

⁸ King County (Wash.), Index to Road Records. 1853–1914.

readily mass-produced, making them easily affordable to the general public.⁹ As more people began to own and drive cars, they demanded better and more extensive road systems. With the creation of the Washington State Highway Department in 1905 and the enactment of the State Aid Law in 1907, the road building process within each county became more structured. State roads were now funded, constructed and maintained out of the state highway fund, and overseen by a commissioned board. In 1911, the Permanent Highway Act increased federal funds for state highway construction as well as setting road standards for the first time.

Improved grading and paving practices including brick, and various types of asphalt, improved communication and access to rural areas of the county. By this time the Pacific Highway was built from Vancouver to Everett (via Bothell), and a hard-surfaced road extended the entire perimeter around Lake Washington.¹⁰ In 1915, the opening of the Sunset Highway as an engineered route over Snoqualmie Pass provided new opportunities for commerce and passenger transport between the east and west sides of the state. By 1916 there were 54 miles of paved roads, and over 1400 miles of gravel or dirt roads in the county.¹¹

⁹ The Seattle Times, September 3, 1916.

¹⁰ Payton, p. 16.

¹¹ Payton, p. 16.

In 1925 the Federal-Aid Highway Act had established the concept of a continuous-national system of highways that would provide uniform standards for state and local roads. In order to meet the needs of an expanded road system, the implementation of hard-surfacing systems for all heavily traveled roads became a priority, as did regulated traffic control devices like road signs and traffic lights. The main highways in King County were all extended or re-routed, and then paved by the late-1920s. Some local roads that serviced urban residents, or provided egress from valley farms to commercial centers, began to be paved at this time, although others remained dirt well into the 1930s.

Modern road system (1930-1960)

As in many communities across the nation, the onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s severely crippled the economy in the Puget Sound area. Major lumber milling and coal mining operations declined or closed completely. “Hooverville” shanties were erected, in the industrial area south of Seattle’s downtown, and around King County thousands of jobless workers became migrants looking for work or handouts.¹² At this time the county partnered with federal agencies to provided economic relief and accomplish a variety of public work

¹² Jesse Jackson, “The Story of Seattle’s Hooverville,” in Calvin F. Schmid, *Social Trends in Seattle* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1944), p. 286-287.



Construction of Lake Washington Floating Bridge, 1939. Courtesy of AAA



programs improving existing transportation systems.

During the Great Depression, road building shifted from state controlled and maintained, back to the local purview. Most of the state's share of federal funds was diverted to the counties so they could hire the unemployed in the area and determine their own priorities.¹³ In King County, the first Lake Washington floating bridge was funded by a 1938 Public Works Administration allocation, and was completed in 1940.

During World War II, road building ground to a halt as road aid funds were frozen and all roadwork was suspended on roads that were not considered essential to the national defense. In King County however, a number of defense contracts helped simulate several local industries, including aviation, ship-building, agriculture and automotive. After the war, the county experienced another boom in population and commerce as these industries continued to thrive, drawing more people to the area.

The post WWII economy allowed more Americans to buy cars, and by 1950, the majority of the nation's freight was being

hauled by truck instead of rail.¹⁴ The post-war push for new roads in King County was driven as much by suburban residential growth as by commerce. The 1950s and '60s witnessed the largest road construction projects in the county to date, including the \$75 million bond issue passed by the State Legislature in 1957 to build the Tacoma-Seattle-Everett Freeway, which later became I-5. By 1960, 935,000 people lived in King County, a 30 percent increase over 10 years previous.¹⁵ Into the next decade and beyond, road building and planning continue to struggle to keep pace with suburban expansion.

13 From 1933-1934, approximately 7,000 men were employed on 151 projects around the state, mostly involving road maintenance, repairs and landscaping. See Paul Dorpat & Genevieve McCoy, *Building Washington: A History of Washington State Public Works* (Seattle: Tartu Publications, 1998), p. 86.

14 Dorpat & McCoy, p. 91.

15 Dorpat & McCoy, p. 97.

